

# Rachel Carson Center

## Perspectives

How to cite:

Quagliati, Noemi. “The Most Famous Landscape.” In: “Storytelling and Environmental History: Experiences from Germany and Italy” edited by Roberta Biasillo and Claudio de Majo, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 2020, no. 2, 52–77. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/9125.

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Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN (print) 2190-5088  
ISSN (online) 2190-8087

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**Figure 1**  
D38 road connecting the city of Verdun  
with the Vauquois memorial, France, 2019  
(Source: Author)

Noemi Quagliati

## The Most Famous Land|Scape

At the center of a quiet tarmacked road punctuated by the rhythmic presence of trees, I spot what seems to be a “classic” French landscape. Immediately, I ask myself, “Come on, what does a ‘classic’ French landscape really mean?” A Van Gogh painting then flashes into my mind. But again, I notice that the Van Gogh oil painting I am picturing represents a landscape of Provence, as well as many of those famous natural scenes portrayed by Cézanne in the Région Sud of France. Due to a background in the visual arts, my “classic” idea of a French landscape is, therefore, actually a painted scene of the French region Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur. However, I am instead experiencing a landscape of Northeast France for the first time. Although some elements of the painted rural landscapes of the European art tradition also occur in the environment I am standing in, the gray, low horizontal clouds that veil the summer sky of the north substitute the warm Mediterranean light portrayed by the two nineteenth-century painters.

It always surprises me how mediated knowledge, gained by means of recurrent or popular images of landscapes from as much as a century ago, influences my physical experience of diverse locations. I often struggle against these ready-made mental images in order to tangibly feel a new environment. In a Cubist exercise to etch in my mind the multiple sides of this new space, I slowly spin around. The tree-lined road divides my frontal view in two: the maize on the left, the wheat on the right, and at the center, the line of the road moves away, narrowing into the distance (fig. 1). Behind me, a green spot indicates a forest. I tell myself, “A piece of wild in this farmland!”

About a century ago, when neither Van Gogh nor Cézanne were still alive, this area constituted the most famous landscape in Europe, photographically mass-reproduced everywhere. These photos were accompanied by the title: The Landscape of the Western Front.

During World War I, positional trench warfare extended from the North Sea to Switzerland, passing through Northeast France. It represented an enormous theater of war not only from a military point of view; it was literally a stage on which military operations, technological innovations, and soldiers' lives were constantly photographed and reproduced in the printing press. All around Europe, the press released images in which the landscape, besides being the background of military (often staged) actions, also constituted the principal character of photographic scenes. Since representations of brutality and death were usually censored (except for enemy casualties and dead horses), one of the main visual categories depicted during World War I was indeed the landscape itself, which was generally understood to be a neutral subject, despite being pervaded by allusive meanings.

Illustrated magazines showed scenery never seen before, with new descriptive landscape categories, such as lunar landscape, red zone, irreparably lost landscape, and no man's land, becoming popular straight after the conflict. All of these terms referred to the highly damaged area of land between the two enemy trench lines. In collective memory, World War I is captured by a black-and-white photograph of a devastated landscape completely transformed by unprecedented destructive technologies. A landscape that has lost all of its landmarks, such as vegetation, trees, cultivations, and villages, remains a barren land—a broken, flattened no man's land without a vanishing point from which to gain perspective (fig. 2). Essentially, the landscape had turned into landscape.



**Figure 2**  
Winter battlefield in Passchendaele with shell holes filled with water  
(Source: *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, no. 1, 1918: 4.)

Bild des (andern) Schlachtfeldes im Winter mit den wassergefüllten Granatkrümmern. Eine Aufnahme aus der Serie des heiß umkämpften Passchendaele. (Eigiger Photograph.)

In other words, representations of World War I displaced all the compositional elements that in the landscape painting tradition had directed the viewer's gaze across a landscape, allowing them to embrace it entirely. In fact, since seventeenth-century Western art, the landscape genre has corresponded to a wide view, usually ensured by a horizontal picture format in which all the visual units of the composition are coherently arranged to ensure total unity. Above land or sea, the upper portion of these views always included the sky, with weather phenomena dominating the composition, artistically represented in the form of clouds, rain, and fog (fig. 3).



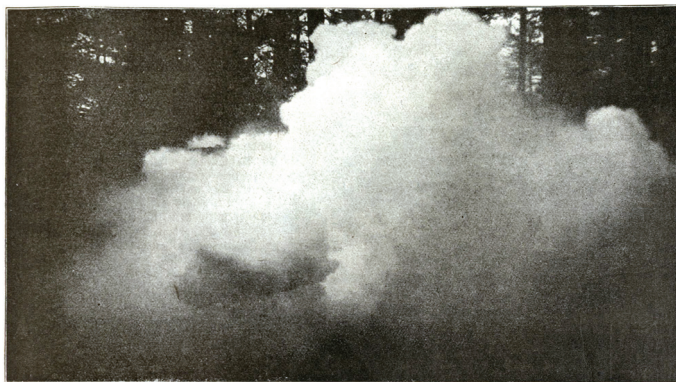
**Figure 3**  
 Different framings of a picturesque landscape  
 (Source: Weiß, Karl. "Die Komposition in der Landschaftsfotographie." In *Deutscher Camera Almanach: Ein Jahrbuch für die Photographie unserer Zeit* Vol. 9, edited by K.W Wolf-Czapek, 11–23. Berlin: Union Dt. Verl.Ges. Roth & Co., 1914.)

However, these iconographic elements changed their meaning in World War I photography. The sky space was drastically reduced and the representation of air in the form of clouds was transformed into clouds of gases (or the effects of mine and shell explosions), which indicated that the landscape ended up being a toxic environment that required soldiers to wear gas masks (fig. 4). Between 1914 and 1918 militarized visuals substituted the completeness of the landscape with the primordial element of the *terrain-soil-ground*. During the conflict, the earth was excavated, perforated, blown up, and turned inside out and upside down (fig. 5). Similarly, the photographed landscape of World War I was scrutinized, fractioned, dissected, measured, analyzed, disguised, and recomposed. Rather than panoramic landscapes, photographs depicted individual sections of land in correspondence to specific targets.

**Figure 4**  
Smoke similar to a cloud formed during the explosion of a gas bomb  
(Source: *Münchener Illustrierte Zeitung*, no. 34, 1917: 341.)

Str. 34

Münchener Illustrierte Zeitung



Leipziger Pressebüro

Wolkenähnliche Rauchbildung bei der Explosion einer Gasbombe

In mass-produced publications, the general public visually experienced topographical surveys composed of sharp photographs of land accompanied by letters, numbers, and arrows indicating exact locations or scientific descriptions of the geography and the geology of places (fig. 6).

**Figure 6**  
Aerial reconnaissance photographs in which specific targets are pointed out by letters. (Source: *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, no. 10, 1917: 130.)

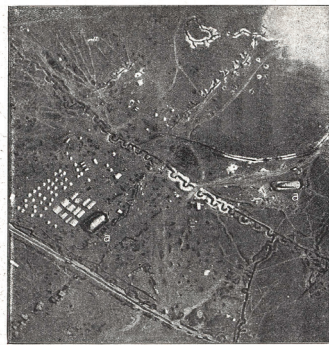
130

Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung.

Str. 10



Flieger-Aufnahme des Bahnhofs Sorebärja:  
Diese fünf unbewachte Bahnhöfe wurde von Fliegern  
einer luftigen Offiziers aufgefunden entdeckt.  
Der deutsche Flieger-Aufnahme Bild erkennen: a und  
b große Hallen und Schuppen; c neue Wasserstation;  
d: 1. Eisenbahnstation.



Das Kampfgelände bildet Montanban, aus  
3000 Meter Höhe aufsteigend.  
Der deutsche Flieger-Aufnahme zeigt andere ge-  
logische Höhenlinien und Höhenverhältnisse. Die  
höhere Temperatur liegt bei 10 Grad Fahrenheit  
für im „Wald“ liegen.

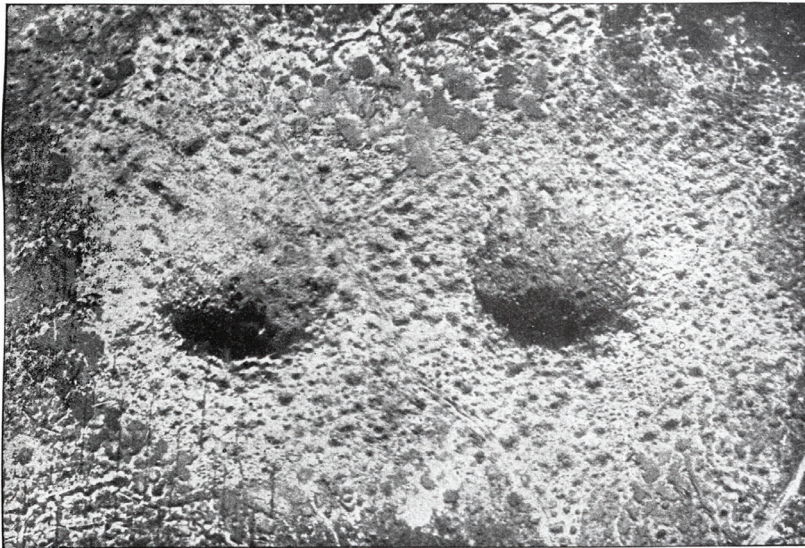
Was der Flieger sieht

Nummer 34.

Seite 1161.



Zwei am Kanal Comins—Ipsen liegende gewaltige Sprengtrichter; der größere hat einen Durchmesser von über 80 Meter.



Nebeneinanderliegende Sprengtrichter, von denen jeder einen Durchmesser von etwa 60 Meter hat.

Die Riefensprengungen der Engländer im Wytjschaetebogen.

Phot. Zwoemte.

**Figure 5**  
Aerial photographs of mine craters reaching diameters of eighty meters produced during the Battle of Messines (Source: *Die Woche*, no. 34, 1917: 1161.)

The large-scale exploitation of the landscape for military purposes was accompanied by the use of aerial photographs as sources of intelligence, which were produced automatically at short intervals within an industrial process aimed at providing as much information as possible about a specified territory. The study of the geographical and climatic conditions of an area and the constant observation of the enemy through innovative photo-optical devices therefore transformed photography from an informative-propagandistic medium to a military weapon used to map, survey, detect, and bomb targets.

It has been estimated that Germany alone took around four thousand aerial photographs a day covering the entire Western Front twice a month in the last year of the war. The land was photographed in every possible manner, from every available perspective. Cameras used in an aerial context could provide both oblique and vertical images. The oblique perspective emphasized the shape of three-dimensional elements, while vertical views taken at higher altitudes with the camera axis perpendicular to the earth's surface included greater areas, allowing photo interpreters to recognize changing patterns on the ground.

If warfare mutated the canonical subjects of landscape representation, turning them into a shell-torn *terrain-soil-ground* that could be sectioned, measured, and scientifically analyzed, the most radical transformation in depicting the shape and features of the land were defined by the aerial vista. The "God's-eye view," an innovative point of view on the world, defined a new topography and a different paradigm for understanding the landscape. For the first time, people were exposed to a great circulation of aerial landscape photographs, which appeared incredibly unusual, distant, and abstract. In World War I, the land was therefore photographed from "above" and from "below," the juxtaposition of images in continuous tension between the abstraction provided by vertical aerial views and empathic representations of the battlefield at ground level (fig. 7).





Das Schlachtfeld. Photographische Aufnahme von einem Kampfplatz im Westen.  
Aus einer französischen Zeitschrift.

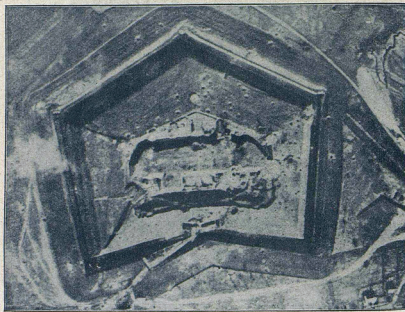
Die Spur des Krieges

Krieg ist Zerstörung. Und die Strafe, die ein kämpfendes Heer gezogen, ist mit den Malen seiner Wirkungen gezeichnet. Deutlich sind allen noch die Bilder des verwüsteten Ostpreußens nach dem ersten Russeneinfall vor Augen; die Schutthügel und Krümmerschaufen, aus denen nur vereinzelte Schornsteine in die blutgetränkte, rauchgeschwängerte Luft ragen und die freundliche, saubere Dörfer und Städte gewesen sind, ehe der zermalmende Eritt des Krieges sie getroffen hatte. Aber mit der Kampftchnik, die

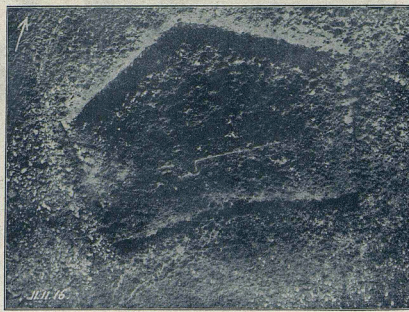
sich seit Beginn dieses Krieges fast von Tag zu Tag fortentwickelt hat, ist auch die Technik der Zerstörung fortgeschritten, die Zahl und die Wirkung der Riesengeschütze, die mit jedem einzelnen Sauch aus ihren Schülden unglaubliche Mengen gewaltiger Sprengstoffe herauschleudern, ins Gigantische gewachsen. Wenn man die Bilder, die jetzt von den heiksumtrittenen Gebieten an der Somme, im Doernbogen und vor Verdun aufgenommen worden sind, mit jenen ostpreussischen Photographien aus dem ersten Kriegsjahre vergleicht, sieht man, wie erschreckend vollkommen die Wirkung des modernen Geschützkampfes geworden

ist. Der ununterbrochene monatelange Eisenregen hat den Landtrieb von der Nordsee bis zur Schweizer Grenze förmlich durchplükt, alte, schattige Wälder sind in dem andauernden Granatenhagel völlig verschwunden, zu winzigen, formlosen Holzsplittern zerstampft worden. Geröll- und Steinschichten bedecken meilenweit das Land, das einst fruchtbaren Ackerboden, gepflegte Weinberge, blühende Wiesen trug. Kaum ein Fuß breit Erde ist zu sehen, wo sich kein Geschöß eingebohrt hat, das Antlitz des Landtriebs, der den Krieg über sich ergehen lassen mußte, ist wie mit Podennarben besät, die lange nicht schwinden werden.

Figure 7  
The landscape of the Western Front (top) and aerial pictures of Fort Douaumont in 1915 and 1916 (bottom) (Source: Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung, no. 4, 1916: 6.)



Fort Douaumont im Frühjahr 1915.



Fort Douaumont nach den Kämpfen 1916.

Photographien von deutschen Fliegern.

One of the largest World War I aerial photographic collections still accessible today is housed in the Bavarian War Archive in Munich. Representing only a small portion of the aerial photographic material produced by German aviators during World War I (the rest of the collection, originally located in Berlin, was destroyed during the Second World War), it includes 127 boxes of files. Each box contains thousands of photographs, including 2,663 images taken by a special aviation unit active in Egypt and Palestine and more than 10,000 aerial photographs taken by training units of various places and military installations in Bavaria. Opening these boxes packed with black-and-white prints, films, and glass plate negatives gives a sense of the enormous amount of visual data accumulated during what was the first aerial warfare in history. Each photograph shows a portion of a new kind of militarized landscape.

Like a military photographic interpreter, I have spent the last few years constantly analyzing, classifying, and reflecting on these photographed landscapes. Pieces of paper, produced and distributed for the most diverse reasons a century ago, reached me, conserving their fragmentary history. My first encounter with the Western Front was, therefore, through these visual traces: a mediated experience of place, expressing a historical understanding of landscape. These images have, nevertheless, influenced the collective interpretation of the interaction between humans and the environment, visually introducing the concept of the endangered landscape.

However, my second encounter with the front lines was of a different kind. Realizing that I theoretically knew enough regarding visual reproductions of the battlefields and the aftermath, I decided it was time to experience these sites through my senses. I left the role of photographic interpreter to do literary fieldwork, visiting a battlefield that is now an agricultural field.

Today, the 700 kilometer frontline is mainly farmland, an agricultural landscape dotted with cities and towns. From time to time, war cemeteries and memorials come into view. In August, the tone of the countryside follows the strong yellows of the cereal crops in eastern France, with endless large round straw bales leaning on the fields, while in Flanders, green hues color the fields due to the heavy clouds (figs. 8–9). Here, during the war, the torrential rain combined with a war-damaged drainage system to create the muddy landscape that has come to symbolize the Third Battle of Ypres. However, between the French region of the Grand Est and West Flanders, the desolate

landscape impressed in the popular imagination does not exist anymore, at least not at first glance. The landscape is instead widely cultivated, spreading from the hilly territory of Verdun through to the rolling uplands of the Somme region and the flat coastal plains of Flanders. To the contemporary aesthetic, which generally links beauty to wilderness rather than to land use, this landscape would probably be described as uniform, perhaps a bit too monotonous, but still pleasing (figs. 10–11).

Soon after the war, tractors substituted tanks. Besides the mechanical noises associated with agricultural activities, natural sounds, including those of animals, replaced the uproar of explosions, which in many images from World War I were represented by soldiers covering their ears with their hands. The relics of the war are, therefore, only detectable by trained eyes. One of the most impressive features created by the war is the mine craters, which are so huge that from the border they cannot be entirely framed in a single shot, not even using a wide-angle lens. When physically standing on the protected margins of these enormous deep holes, the eyes need to move following an imaginary triangle: from the left to the right, from the right to the bottom of the crater, and then from the bottom to the left again.

Some of the craters have changed their shape and meaning, with the *Spanbroekmolenkrater*, for instance, becoming the Pool of Peace (fig. 12). Some of the other craters, such as the *Lochnagar* crater (which being 30 meters deep and 100 meters wide was amply photographed by the Allies and even portrayed by the Irish artist William Orpen during wartime), have been subject to severe erosion (fig. 13). Visiting the region is like being on a treasure hunt: you have to search to find the craters. However, they can be immediately spotted through a drone's aerial view, with strange circles distinguished from the repetitive lines of the cultivated fields. Observing from an elevated position is essential to recognizing the extension of the front line. In fact, where not constantly preserved (fig. 14), trenches are only visible through the different colors and patterns of the cultivations, as seen from an aerial perspective.

Nowadays, the remains of military forts constitute the reign of birds. Fortifications, which are incorporated into artificial hills, house birds' nests in the nooks and crannies of the building's concrete surfaces. Moreover, flocks of swallows dart around the ruins and often perch on rusted metal pickets, which were used to support barbed wire during battle (figs. 15–16). Inhabitants returned to regions occupied by the Western

Front, again reshaping the landscape for human use by rebuilding towns, flattening the battlefield, and rehabilitating the land for agriculture.

Repopulation has not occurred in the *Zone Rouge* (Red Zone), however, where only some species of nonhuman life survive. This zone was originally a 1,200 square kilometer area designated after the war as being “completely devastated.” This meant that damage to both property and agriculture was estimated to be 100 percent, making it impossible to rehabilitate the land in order to sustain human activity. Today, this area, banned by law from public entry and agricultural use, has been reduced to 100 square kilometers. Here, the “catastrophic anthropogenic disturbance” caused to soil by unexploded chemical munitions, heavy pollution, acids, and animal and human remains will not be fully remediated for at least another three hundred years, according to the latest studies.

In some of these areas, such as in the Place-à-Gaz in Verdun, so called due to the high level of arsenic in the soil caused by the incineration of chemical shells, only three types of plants (*Holcus lanatus*, *Pohlia nutans*, and *Cladonia fimbriata*) grow. Therefore, the most severe scars of World War I still lie underground, a realm which has, in the meantime, become an archeological archive. Visitors only recognize the invisible toxicity of this region through warning signs like “Danger” and “Interdit au Public” announcing that access is prohibited.

Besides the off-limit areas, natural recovery has softened the effects of the war on the landscape of the Western Front. As poppies thrived on the disturbed soil caused by warfare, they became a symbol of remembrance, while other flowers such as *Salvia officinalis* now randomly appear on the green, artificial hills, which were created as a result of mine explosions (figs. 17–19). In the same craters, deer and boars bathe and drink. Visually, the forestland that nowadays emerges from the cultivated fields in Verdun was once the most heavily impacted section of the battlefield. Paradoxically, what at present seems to be the “wildest” part of the region was previously the most brutally devastated by the war. After World War I, the French government reforested the battlefield in Verdun, prohibiting it from human use. As part of war reparations, Germany provided 153,000 small conifer trees together with 1,400 kilograms of acorns and 180 kilograms of resin-tree seeds. The region was, therefore, abandoned (nine villages were never reconstructed) and covered with vegetation. For security reasons,


the place was designated a military exclusion zone, later becoming an “artificially spontaneous” (un|natural) living entity.

Without human activity, the landscape quickly evolved, altering its micro-environmental properties, allowing flora and fauna to repopulate the area. In fact, the sole area of the Western Front excluded from heavy mechanical flattening, which occurred due to agricultural needs after the war, is this man-made forest, with reforestation occurring in the aftermath of an ecological disaster. Due to soil pollution, the landscape is now mainly influenced and framed by nonhuman processes (fig. 20).

Venturing into these green, morphologically atypical woods reveals both the scale of the environmental destruction caused by human activities and the capacity of nature to transform landscapes given time. Vegetation hides the scars of war but simultaneously conserves a novel microcosm, a type of landscape that functions simultaneously as a source of collective memory and admonition, while also attesting to the possibility of natural regeneration.

The photographs I study every day for my PhD are historical, although incomplete, traces of real or ideal places. Similarly, the forest of Verdun is one of the last visual witnesses of the devastated and toxic landscape of the Western Front. Nevertheless, it is a hybrid environment that is slowly recovering its nonhuman properties: a long process that might symbolize an idea of the landscape of the future.





The Lesser-Known  
Landscape

The Western Front in Photographs, 2019  
By Noemi Quagliati



**Figure 8**  
Fields in West Flanders,  
Belgium, 2019





**Figure 9**  
Fields in West Flanders,  
Belgium, 2019



**Figure 10**  
Fields in the Somme,  
France, 2019



Figure 11  
Fields in the Somme,  
France, 2019



Figure 12  
Spanbroekmolen Crater, Heuvelland,  
Belgium, 2019



Figure 13  
Lochnagar Crater, Pacardy,  
France, 2019

Figure 14  
Preserved trenches in  
Vauquois,  
France, 2019





**Figure 15**  
Ruins of Fort Douaumont,  
France, 2019



**Figure 16**  
Birds on the ruins of Fort  
Douaumont, France, 2019



**Figure 17**  
The Vauquois Hill  
battlefield, France 2019



**Figure 18**  
The Vauquois Hill  
battlefield, France 2019





**Figure 19**  
Beaumont-Hamel Newfoundland memorial site,  
Somme, France, 2019

Figure 20  
Verdun forest margin,  
France, 2019



## Further Reading

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